Ipsos Reid

POST-SECONDARY ACCESSIBILITY STUDY

Prepared By Ipsos-Reid Corporation
For Alberta Learning
April 2001

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

In late 1999, Alberta Learning initiated a research study of post-secondary accessibility. A two-staged study was conducted involving focus groups and a telephone survey. The purpose of the study was to identify the factors that influence decisions to pursue or not pursue post-secondary learning, and to gather perceptions of non-financial and financial barriers to post-secondary learning.

Thirty-four focus groups were conducted across the province between July 24 and August 3, 2000. A total of 248 individuals participated in these sessions, including high school students, post-secondary students (with and without government financial assistance), post-secondary graduates (with and without government student loan debt), employers of apprentices, high school counsellors, financial aid administrators, Aboriginal high school and secondary students, parents of high school and post-secondary students, youth not enrolled in post-secondary learning, and adults considering post-secondary education.

Following the completion of the focus groups, a telephone survey of 1,806 1999/2000 Alberta high school graduates was conducted between October 27 and November 8, 2000. The overall margin of error associated with this sample size is +/- 2.25% at the 95% confidence level.

This report presents the most salient findings from this research, focusing primarily on results from the survey of recent Alberta high school graduates.

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STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

ENROLMENT STATUS

- At the time of the survey, more than one-half (54%) of recent Alberta high school graduates were enrolled either full-time (46%) or part-time (7%) in a post-secondary institution or apprenticeship training program (Figure 1). An additional eight percent of respondents were in high school and 38% were not enrolled in either high school or a post-secondary program.
- Among those enrolled in post-secondary education full-time, 49% were enrolled in degree-granting institutions, 42% in public colleges or technical institutes, 5% in other types of institutions (e.g. religious institutions or private vocational schools), 4% in institutions outside of Alberta, and one percent in apprenticeship training programs (Figure 1).

54% of recent high school graduates continued their education in a post-secondary institution directly out of high school.

Figure 1

Enrolment Status
- Overview -

Enrolment Status	2000
TOTAL IN SCHOOL OR POST-SECONDARY	62%
Enrolled in post-secondary	54%
Enrolled in post-secondary full-time	46%
Degree granting	49%
College/ technical	42%
Other institutions	5%
Outside Alberta	4%
Apprenticeship	1%
Enrolled in post-secondary part-time	7%
In high school	8%
NOT ENROLLED	38%
TOTAL # OF RESPONDENTS	1,906

- In the survey, the key factors influencing post-secondary attendance included academic achievement (grade 12 marks), parental encouragement, the perceived necessity of a post-secondary education in the job market, the timing of the decision to attend or not attend, community size, and socio-economic background (including parental education levels and household income). Post-secondary costs were cited as an important reason for not attending post-secondary learning.

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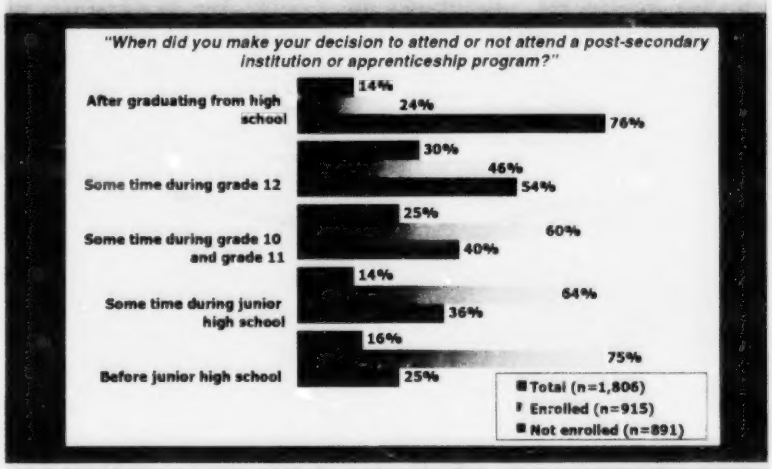
- Academic achievement in high school was the strongest predictor of post-secondary attendance. 85% of those with a grade 12 average of 80% or higher were enrolled in post-secondary learning, compared to 28% of those with average grades of between 50% and 64%. Of graduates who were defined as being eligible to attend university, 80% of those from lower-income backgrounds (household incomes of less than $40,000) were enrolled in a post-secondary institution compared to 83% of those from higher-income backgrounds (household incomes of $70,000 or more).
- Thinking back to their last year of high school (i.e. 1999/2000), most respondents (87%) felt it was either very (74%) or somewhat (13%) likely that they would pursue post-secondary education. Eight percent were undecided and an additional five percent believed that it was unlikely they would attend.
- Those who made their decision earlier than Grade 12 were more likely to be enrolled in post-secondary studies (Figure 2). For example, 75% of those who made their attendance decision before junior high school were enrolled in post-secondary learning compared to 24% of those who made their decision after graduating from high school.

75% of those who made their attendance decision before junior high school were enrolled compared to 25% of those who made their decision after graduating from high school.

Figure 2

Timing of Post-Secondary Decisions



REASONS FOR ATTENDING

- The vast majority (94%) of recent graduates attending post-secondary learning decided to enrol because they believed it would improve their chances of getting a job (Figure 3). Almost nine-in-ten respondents agreed that they decided to continue with their learning to achieve greater earning potential in the future (87%), or because the type of job they want requires it (86%). These key reasons were also noted by focus group participants as the main reasons for attending post-secondary learning. A somewhat smaller proportion of respondents agreed that they were attending post-secondary learning for personal growth or fulfillment (79%).

Of respondents who were enrolled in post-secondary learning, 94% decided to continue their education to improve their chances of getting a job.

- As well, roughly six-in-ten recent graduates who were enrolled in post-secondary learning decided to attend to gain independence (66%) or because they enjoy learning (60%) (Figure 3). More than one-half of respondents also indicated that they decided to attend to have the prestige of having a post-secondary education (56%) or because their parents wanted them to continue (51%).

Figure 3

Main Reasons for Attending Post-Secondary Learning

Proximity to home and programs offered are the main reasons cited for choosing to attend specific types of post-secondary institutions.

- The main reasons for choosing to attend either a degree-granting institution or a college or technical institute were the same: proximity to home, and the programs offered (Figure 4). Colleges and technical institutions were also chosen because of lower tuition fees. Degree-granting institutions were also chosen because of associated future employment opportunities.

Figure 4

Main Reasons for Institution Choice

"What is the most important reason you chose the type of post-secondary institution (that is, a university, college, technical institute, etc.) you are now attending? What is the second most important reason?"

Reasons	Degree Granting	Colleges/ Technical Institutions
	(n=330)	(n=501)
Program was offered there	30%	34%
It was close to home	33%	31%
The tuition fees were lower	3%	20%
Higher education to get a good job	28%	18%
My parents wanted me to	10%	3%
Smaller class sizes	0%	10%
It had a good reputation	17%	9%
High job placement rate	7%	7%
It is a relatively small institution	2%	5%
I wanted an academic program	5%	3%

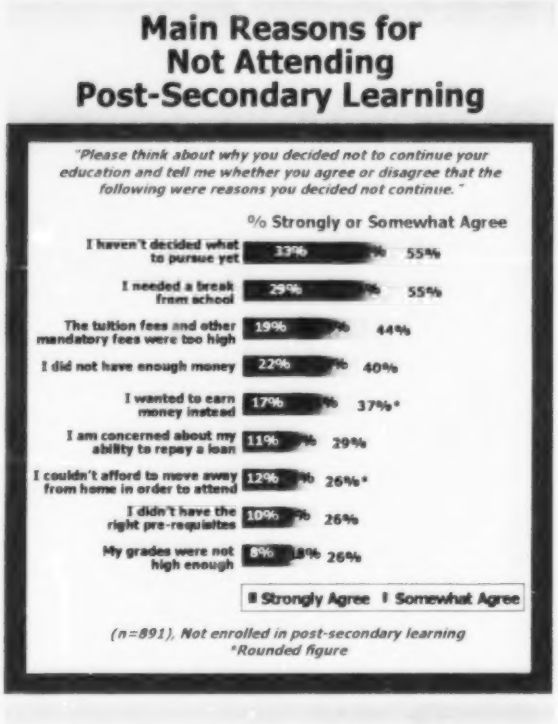
REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING

Over half of graduates who chose not to continue their education immediately after high school stated that they had not yet decided what to pursue or that they needed a break from school.

- More than one-half of respondents not currently enrolled in post-secondary learning decided not to attend because they had not yet decided what to pursue (55%) or because they needed a break from school (55%) (Figure 5).
- Several cost-related or financial reasons were mentioned as reasons for not attending post-secondary learning (Figure 5). For example, 44% indicated a view that the tuition fees and other mandatory fees were too high, 40% that they did not have enough money, 37% that they wanted to earn money instead, 29% because of debt aversion, and 26% due to the perceived costs of post-secondary learning associated with living away from home. In addition to these factors, 26% stated that they did not attend post-secondary education because their grades were not high enough.

- Other reasons for not attending post-secondary learning (cited by less than 25% of respondents) ranged from not having adequate information to make a decision to not being accepted by the desired institution or to being too intimidated by a post-secondary setting to attend.

Figure 5


Main Reasons for Not Attending Post-Secondary Learning
"Please think about why you decided not to continue your education and tell me whether you agree or disagree that the following were reasons you decided not continue."
% Strongly or Somewhat Agree
I haven't decided what to pursue yet
33%
55%
I needed a break from school
29%
55%
The tuition fees and other mandatory fees were too high
19%
44%
I did not have enough money
22%
40%
I wanted to earn money instead
17%
37%*
I am concerned about my ability to repay a loan
11%
29%
I couldn't afford to move away from home in order to attend
12%
26%*
I didn't have the right pre-requisites
10%
26%
My grades were not high enough
8%
18%
26%
Strongly Agree
Somewhat Agree
(n=891), Not enrolled in post-secondary learning
*Rounded figure

97% of those not currently enrolled in post-secondary learning believe they will pursue a post-secondary education in the future.

- Almost all (97%) respondents who were not currently enrolled thought they would pursue post-secondary studies sometime in the future. This finding was similar to feedback from the focus groups. Among individuals who were not enrolled, but intended to enrol, most (68%) intended to pursue post-secondary learning within the next year. An additional 22% intended to enrol within three years, three percent within five years, and one percent within ten years.

PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO POST-SECONDARY LEARNING

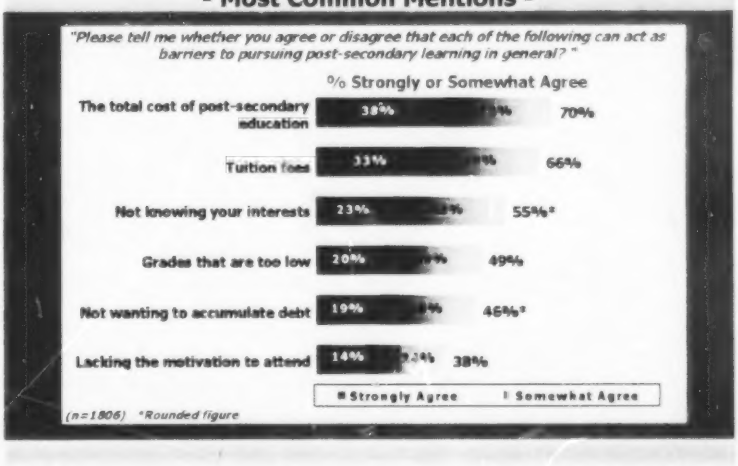
- All respondents, regardless of their enrolment status at the time of the survey, were read a list of factors that might act as barriers to post-secondary learning. Seven-in-ten (70%) recent high school graduates agreed that the total cost of post-secondary education can act as a barrier to pursuing post-secondary learning (Figure 6). Two-thirds (66%) of respondents also agreed that tuition and other mandatory fees can prevent people from attending.

- Roughly one-half of those surveyed agreed that not knowing your interests (55%), having grades that are too low (49%), and not wanting to accumulate debt (46%) may be barriers to pursuing post-secondary learning. In addition, 38% of respondents viewed lacking the motivation to attend as a barrier to continuing one's education. Less common perceived barriers included lacking information about employment opportunities for post-secondary graduates (36%), the location of post-secondary institutions (34%), lacking information about post-secondary education in general (33%), and disliking a school environment (31%).

The most common perceived barriers to post-secondary learning were the total cost of post-secondary education, tuition fees, and not knowing one's interests. Respondents from lower-income households were particularly likely to see post-secondary costs and tuition fees as barriers.

Figure 6

Perceived Barriers to Post-Secondary Learning
- Most Common Mentions -



- Another one-quarter of respondents viewed fearing the unknown, lacking self-confidence, and the influence of friends or peers, as barriers to pursuing a post-secondary education.

- Those enrolled and already paying for their education were more likely to view post-secondary costs and eligibility criteria as barriers than those who were not enrolled. On the other hand, those not currently enrolled placed a relatively stronger emphasis on not knowing one's interests, not wanting to accumulate debt, and a lack of information about post-secondary education as barriers to pursuing post-secondary learning.
- There was a discrepancy between the reasons respondents provided for not attending post-secondary learning and the factors they cited as perceived barriers to attending. Post-secondary costs were perceived as the greatest barrier, but they were not the main reason that individuals actually did not attend (Figure 7). The key actual reasons for not enrolling were not having decided what to pursue, and needing a break from school, followed by cost-related reasons.

Post-secondary costs are perceived as the greatest barrier to post-secondary learning, but they are not the main reason that individuals do not attend.

Figure 7

Reasons for Not Attending vs. Perceived Barriers Among Those Not Enrolled

Ranked Reasons for Not Attending	Ranked Perceived Barriers
• Have not decided what to pursue	• Cost of post-secondary education
• Needed a break from school	• Tuition fees
• Tuition was too high	• Not knowing interests
• Did not have enough money	• Not wanting debt
• Wanted to earn money instead	• Grades are too low
• Concerned about repaying loans	• Lacking employment opps. info.
• Could not afford to move away	• Lacking post-sec. education info.
• Did not have the pre-requisites	• Location of institution
• Grades were not high enough	• Lacking motivation to attend
• Did not have enough information	• Fearing the unknown

POST-SECONDARY COSTS AND FINANCING

Recent high school graduates in Alberta over-estimate direct post-secondary costs for all types of post-secondary education (especially tuition). Those not enrolled in post-secondary studies, those from middle income households, and those not in close proximity to a post-secondary institution were most likely to over-estimate costs.

- Recent high school graduates were asked to estimate tuition and other mandatory fees for various types of post-secondary education and training. Respondents were not prompted with ranges, but were asked to identify a figure on their own.
- Respondents estimated the tuition and other mandatory fees for a full-time one-year undergraduate university program to be $5,788, compared to the actual average cost of $3,883 (Figure 8). Tuition and other mandatory fees for a one-year full-time college program were estimated to be $4,624, compared to the actual average cost of $2,460. Further, tuition and other mandatory fees for one year in a full-time technical institute program were estimated to be $4,719, compared to the actual average cost of $2,401. Tuition costs and other mandatory fees for one period of in-school training for an apprenticeship program were also over-estimated at $2,002, compared to actual average costs of $200 to $600. Focus group participants also overestimated post-secondary costs.

Figure 8

Perceived Tuition and Other Mandatory Fees

"How much do you think tuition and other mandatory fees such as library and health fees are for ... ?"

Program Type	Mean	Actual Mean Average Cost	% Over-Estimated
1 Year in a full-time university undergraduate program	$ 5,788 ($ 5,184)*	$ 3,883	49% (34%)*
1 Year in a full-time college program	$ 4,624 ($ 4,110)*	$ 2,460	88% (67%)*
1 Year in a full-time technical institute program	$ 4,719 ($ 4,204)*	$ 2,401	97% (75%)*
1 period (between 4 and 12 weeks) of in-school training for an apprenticeship program	$ 2,002 ($ 1,695)*	$50/week or $200-$600	233% (183%)*

(n=1, 806); (*)=Trimmed mean (mean + two standard deviations)

- Respondents also over-estimate average student loan debt amounts (Figure 9). For example, the estimated student loan debt for a four-year undergraduate program was $24,653, compared to the actual debt of $17,942.

Figure 9

Perceived Student Loan Debt

"For post-secondary students with student loans, what do you think is the average debt that a graduate will leave with from...?

	Four-year undergraduate program	Two-year college/technical program
Mean	$24,653 ($22,493)*	$12,962 ($11,835)*
Actual Average Net Student Loan Debt (1999/2000)	$17,942	$10,158
% Over-estimated	37% (25%)*	28% (17%)*

Those actually receiving government student loans more accurately assess the total projected undergraduate program debt load to be $21,325.

(n=1, 806); (*)=Trimmed mean (mean + two standard deviations)

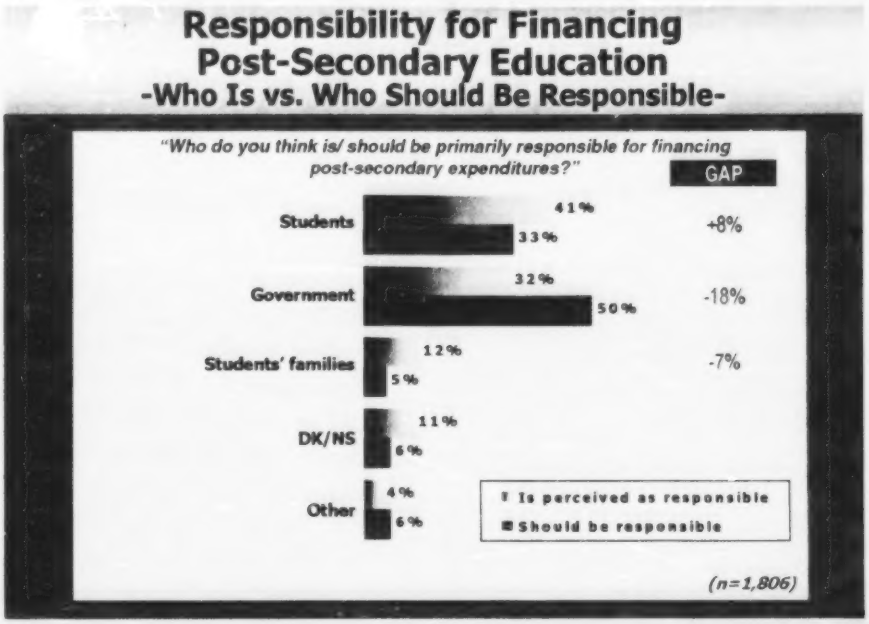
Average student loan debts are also over-estimated by recent high school graduates.

- Recently enrolled post-secondary students accessed an average of 2.5 sources of financing to pay for their studies. Post-secondary students are gathering funds from various sources to pay for their higher education, primarily from parents (70%), personal earnings (49%), scholarships (47%), and part-time work (39%).
- Approximately one-in-six (17%) recent Alberta high school graduates attending a post-secondary institution had received a government student loan. Of those receiving student loans, 61% were satisfied with the amount of financial assistance awarded for meeting their basic needs[1].
- Respondents under-estimated the extent to which government is financing post-secondary learning. 41% believed that students were responsible for financing post-secondary expenditures, while 32% believed government was primarily responsible for paying for post-secondary expenditures (Figure 10). These findings are consistent with those from the focus groups.

Respondents under-estimated the extent to which government is financing post-secondary learning.

[1] Caution: Small sample size (n=164)

Figure 10



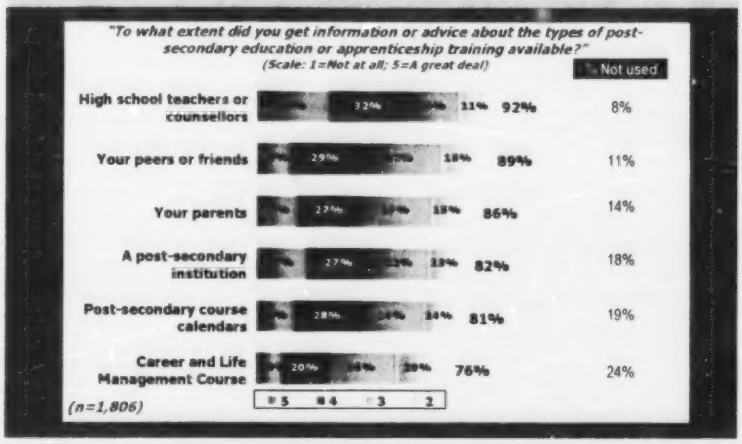
POST-SECONDARY INFORMATION NEEDS

Approximately nine-in-ten high school graduates received information about post-secondary learning from high school teachers or counsellors, from peers or friends, or from parents.

- The vast majority (93%) of recent high school graduates considered themselves aware of the types of post-secondary education and training available. However, only one-third (32%) was very aware of these options. This finding is consistent with the feedback provided in the focus group workshops, which showed a relatively low degree of awareness of post-secondary options.
- The most common sources of information about post-secondary learning involve one-on-one contact with a student and another individual (Figure 11). Approximately nine-in-ten graduates used high school teachers or counsellors (92%), peers and friends (89%), and their parents (86%) as resources. Eight-in-ten high school graduates used information sources provided directly by a post-secondary institution (82%), or via post-secondary course calendars (81%). Their high school's Career and Life Management (CALM) course (76%) was also commonly used.

Figure 11

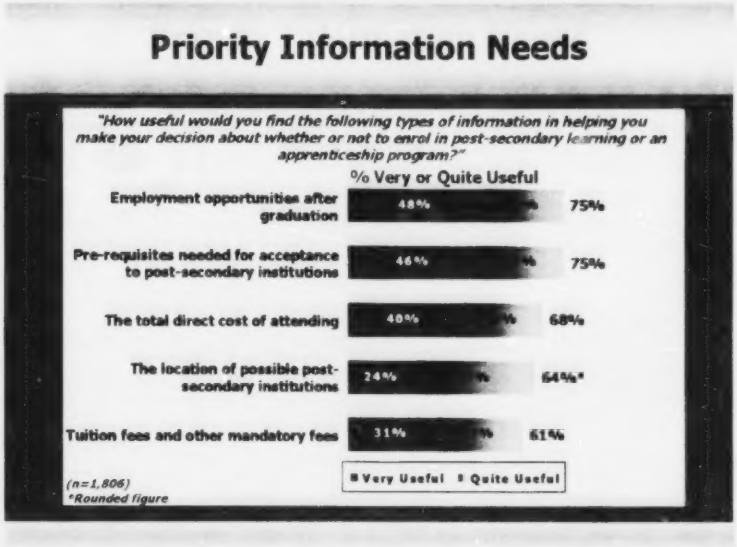
Information Sources Used Most Often



Priority information needs focused on employment opportunities after graduation, pre-requisites needed for acceptance to post-secondary institutions, and the cost of attending.

- Information sources consulted less often were the media (70%), the Internet (64%), and student award offices at post-secondary institutions (59%). Information sources sponsored by governments were used by less than three-in-ten graduates. Specifically, 28% used Canada-Alberta Service Centres, and 21% used the Alberta Learning Information System (ALIS) website.
- Consistent with the focus group findings, priority information needs focused on job and career possibilities, eligibility criteria, and cost (Figure 12). Three-quarters of recent high school graduates indicated that information regarding employment opportunities after graduation (75%) and pre-requisites needed for acceptance to post-secondary institutions (75%) would be useful in deciding whether to pursue post-secondary education. Other priority information needs were the total direct cost of attending (68%), the location of possible post-secondary institutions (64%), and tuition fees and other mandatory fees (61%).

Figure 12



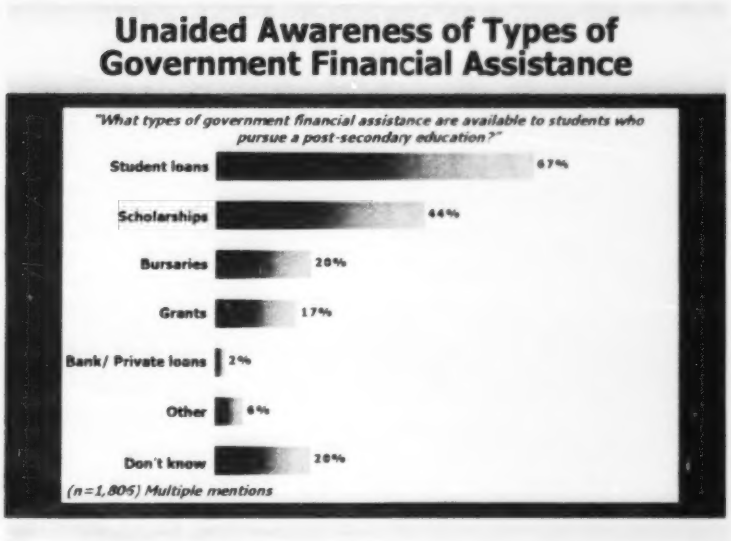
- As well, more than one-half of recent graduates considered information regarding the types of financial assistance available to be useful (55%), and 53% would find information about the transferability of courses useful. Somewhat fewer respondents considered information on how to get student loans (48%), the process for repaying student loans (43%), class sizes (39%), and housing or rental options (35%) as useful types of information.

AWARENESS OF POST-SECONDARY FINANCING OPTIONS

Respondents' primary information sources about post-secondary costs were high school teachers and counsellors (87%), parents (84%), and peers or friends (81%).

- Respondents' primary information sources about post-secondary costs were high school teachers or counsellors (87%), parents (84%) and peers or friends (81%). These were the same sources graduates used to obtain information about post-secondary learning options in general.
- Respondents were asked to identify, on their own, the types of financial assistance available to students who pursue post-secondary learning. 20% of respondents could not identify any type of government financial assistance available to students who pursue a post-secondary education (Figure 13). The type of government financial assistance with the highest awareness level was student loans (67%). A minority of respondents was aware of other types of government financial assistance such as scholarships (44%), bursaries (20%) or grants (17%).

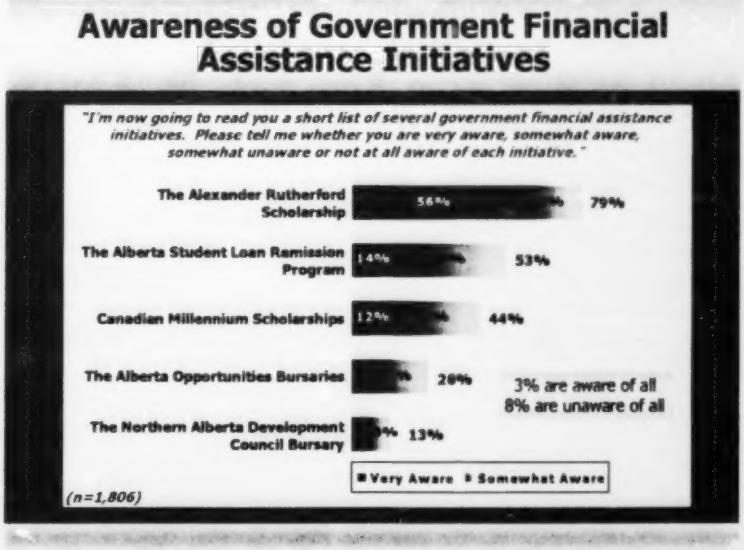
Figure 13


Unaided Awareness of Types of Government Financial Assistance
"What types of government financial assistance are available to students who pursue a post-secondary education?"
Student loans 67%
Scholarships 44%
Bursaries 28%
Grants 17%
Bank/ Private loans 2%
Other 6%
Don't know 28%
(n=1,805) Multiple mentions

- Respondents also indicated how aware they were of selected government financial assistance initiatives (Figure 14). Many respondents were aware of the Alexander Rutherford Scholarship (79%), followed by the Alberta Student Loan Remission Program (53%). Less than one-half of respondents were aware of the Canadian Millennium Scholarships (44%), and even fewer were aware of the Alberta Opportunities Bursaries (26%), or the Northern Alberta Development Council Bursary (13%). Even in Northern Alberta, only 26% were aware of the Northern Alberta Development Council Bursary.

A minority of recent high school graduates was aware of certain government financial assistance initiatives. 79% were aware of the Alexander Rutherford Scholarship, and 53% were aware of the Alberta Student Loan Remission Program.

Figure 14


Awareness of Government Financial Assistance Initiatives
"I'm now going to read you a short list of several government financial assistance initiatives. Please tell me whether you are very aware, somewhat aware, somewhat unaware or not at all aware of each initiative."
The Alexander Rutherford Scholarship 56% 79%
The Alberta Student Loan Remission Program 14% 53%
Canadian Millennium Scholarships 12% 44%
The Alberta Opportunities Bursaries 26%
The Northern Alberta Development Council Bursary 13%
3% are aware of all
8% are unaware of all
Very Aware
Somewhat Aware
(n=1,806)

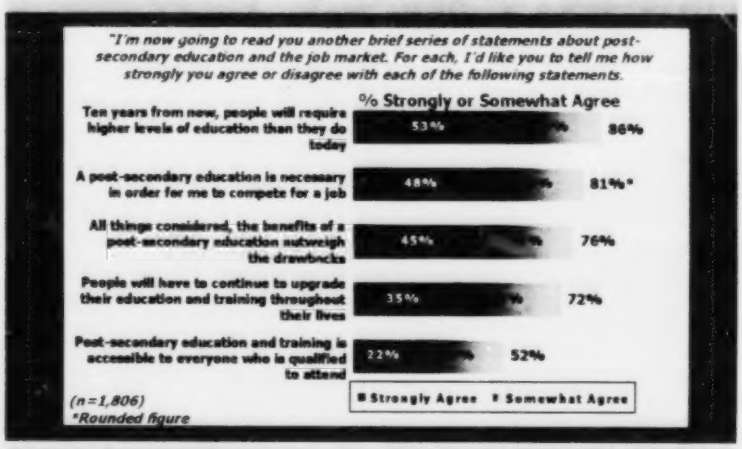
VIEWS ON EDUCATION AND JOBS

Most graduates (78%) see a post-secondary education as an investment in the future, and believe that the benefits of a post-secondary education outweigh the drawbacks (76%)

- Post-secondary education is considered to be a present day necessity to achieve success in the labour market – and an even greater requirement in the future (Figure 15). Most (86%) recent high school graduates believe that, in ten years, people will require higher levels of education than they do today. The majority (72%) also believe that individuals will need to continually upgrade their education and training throughout their lives. Focus group participants also held these views.

Figure 15

Perceptions of Post-Secondary Education and the Labour Market

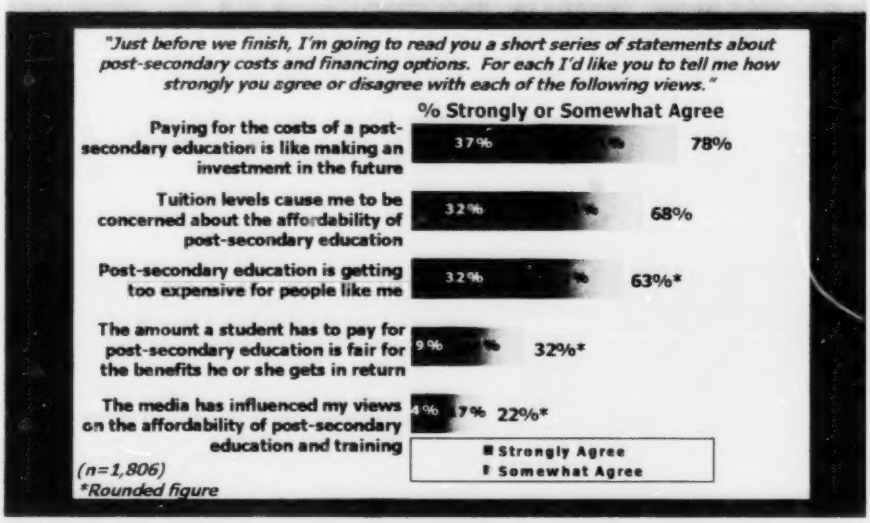

"I'm now going to read you another brief series of statements about post-secondary education and the job market. For each, I'd like you to tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.
% Strongly or Somewhat Agree
Ten years from now, people will require higher levels of education than they do today
53%
86%
A post-secondary education is necessary in order for me to compete for a job
48%
81%*
All things considered, the benefits of a post-secondary education outweigh the drawbacks
45%
76%
People will have to continue to upgrade their education and training throughout their lives
35%
72%
Post-secondary education and training is accessible to everyone who is qualified to attend
22%
52%
(n=1,806)
*Rounded figure
Strongly Agree
Somewhat Agree

At the same time, only half believe that post-secondary education is accessible to everyone who is qualified to attend, and the majority (63%) believes that post-secondary education is getting too expensive.

- The majority of respondents reported that tuition levels cause them to be concerned about the affordability of post-secondary education (Figure 16). 63% believe that post-secondary education is "getting too expensive for people like me", and 32% feel that the amount students pay for post-secondary education is fair for the benefits received in return. At the same time, most recent high school graduates associate the costs of a post-secondary education with an investment in the future (78%). Moreover, the benefits of a post-secondary education are perceived to outweigh the drawbacks (76% agree). These results confirm focus group participants' views that the long-term benefits of post-secondary learning generally outweigh short-term drawbacks.

Figure 16

Views of Post-Secondary Costs and Financing Options


"Just before we finish, I'm going to read you a short series of statements about post-secondary costs and financing options. For each I'd like you to tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following views."
% Strongly or Somewhat Agree
Paying for the costs of a post-secondary education is like making an investment in the future
37%
78%
Tuition levels cause me to be concerned about the affordability of post-secondary education
32%
68%
Post-secondary education is getting too expensive for people like me
32%
63%*
The amount a student has to pay for post-secondary education is fair for the benefits he or she gets in return
9%
32%*
The media has influenced my views on the affordability of post-secondary education and training
4%
17%
22%*
Strongly Agree
Somewhat Agree
(n=1,806)
*Rounded figure

93% of recent high school graduates believe they will complete a post-secondary education at some point.

- Respondents expressed a strong sense of personal responsibility in achieving future goals. 92% of recent high school graduates agree that "what happens to them in the future mostly depends on them", and 88% believe that they "can do pretty much anything they put their mind to". As well, a significant majority (85%) of recent high school graduates report that if they "want a post-secondary education badly enough, they can overcome any barrier". The notion of sacrificing for long-term benefits is also prevalent among respondents, with 84% believing that "it's important to have long-term goals and stick to them, even if it means sacrificing some things today".
- With respect to respondents' long-term educational goals, 93% of recent high school graduates believe they will complete a post-secondary education at some point. A total of 40% predict the completion of a post-graduate degree, 32% a college, technical or apprenticeship program, and 21% an undergraduate university degree.

RESPONDENTS' ADVICE TO ALBERTA LEARNING

Advice to Alberta Learning centred on reducing the cost of post-secondary education.

- Respondents answered an open-ended question on what change(s) they would suggest for Alberta's post-secondary system. Recommended changes focused primarily on cost (66% mention reducing costs, primarily tuition fees) (Figure 17). Other less common suggestions focused on modifying institutional systems (13%) (e.g. making educational resources more accessible), making post-secondary learning more accessible (9%) (e.g. lowering entrance requirements), and providing information (7%). The suggestion to review costs and funding was also the most commonly cited recommendation in the focus groups.

Figure 17